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CATHODIC PROTECTION DEVICE FOR FLEXIBLE PIPES

The present invention relates to a cathodic protection device for flexible pipes used in the off-shore oil industry and comprising in the outer layers at least one polymeric sealing sheath and a metal structural element such as an armour ply.

Flexible pipes are used to transport crude oil between a wellhead or other underwater system and a floating structure such as a platform.

Flexible pipes generally comprise a polymeric outer sealing sheath and an inner sealing sheath. The annulus, made between these outer and inner sealing sheaths, constitutes a space in which metal structural elements are housed, such as armour plies, a pressure vault, a hoop, etc., depending on the type of flexible pipe used. The various types of flexible pipe are described and shown in API (American Petroleum Institute) 17J.

When the outer sealing sheath of a flexible pipe which is immersed in seawater becomes damaged for whatever reason, part of the immediately adjacent metal element, generally an armour ply consisting of a helical winding of a certain number of metal wires about the longitudinal axis of the said flexible pipe, is exposed to and in contact with the seawater, the area of armour ply thus exposed depending on the size of the tear created in the outer sheath.

Contact with seawater causes corrosion, which may propagate over the entire length of the flexible pipe.

To prevent corrosion of the metal elements of the

flexible pipe, due to penetration of seawater into the annulus, the means most often used is in the field. Cathodic protection consists in that called "cathodic protection", well known to experts creating an
5 electrochemical cell so as to reduce the immunity potential.

This is because each metal has a reference potential, called corrosion potential, with respect to the aqueous
10 medium, which potential varies according to the level of corrosion. The greater the corrosion, the higher the potential of the metal with respect to the reference potential. Conversely, the smaller the corrosion, the lower the potential of the metal with respect to the
15 reference potential.

In the case of flexible pipes containing steel, the reference potential of the steel is -440 mV and the immunity potential is -850 mV.

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As long as the metallic region of a flexible pipe in contact with the seawater has a potential below -850 mV, the reactions are essentially cathodic and the said region does not corrode. To provide cathodic
25 protection, the steel to be protected is brought into electrical contact with a less noble metal, which has a lower reference potential, such as that of aluminium which is -1100 mV, this less noble metal acting as an anode while the steel region to be protected acts as a
30 cathode. At the point of contact, the steel will have the potential of the anode, this potential gradually increasing on moving away from the anode, this being due to the resistance of the structural metal elements of the flexible pipe to be protected and to the
35 exchange current density.

The current density depends on the cross section of the bared region in contact with the seawater or more simply of the hole in the outer sealing sheath. The
5 formula giving the value of the current density as a function of the cross section of the hole is well known to experts.

The number of anodes is determined so that at any point on the flexible pipe between two consecutive anodes,
10 the potential of the steel is always less than -850 mV.

At the present time, the anodes are external and fitted near the end fittings well known to experts, the said end fittings being terminal members of a flexible pipe
15 used for connecting one end of the flexible pipe to a fixed or movable means such as, for example, a wellhead, a manifold, etc., or to another flexible or rigid pipe, or to a coupling member of the floating structure.

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In a end fitting, all the armour plies of the flexible pipe are bent and in intimate contact with the metal vault of the end fitting, generally by means of a retention and holding band. A metal cap is placed
25 around the assembly thus produced and constitutes the external part of the end fitting which is watertight, the free space between the cap and the vault of the end fitting being filled with a resin such as ARALDITE. In addition, the protective cap is screwed onto the vault
30 of the said end fitting so that a continuous connection is provided between the cap, the vault and all the armours as recommended by DNV (Det Norske Veritas) RP-B401 (Cathodic protection design). When the flexible pipe is provided with a cathodic protection anode
35 system for protecting the armours from corrosion, a

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35 - Figure 1 is a schematic plan view of a long

flexible pipe provided at each end with a end fitting and with devices according to the invention;

- Figure 2 is a partial schematic sectional view of a portion of flexible pipe provided with a device
5 according to the invention;

- Figure 3 is a sectional view of a clamp or collar fitted on a flexible pipe;

- Figure 4 is a longitudinal, partial and schematic sectional view of another embodiment of the
10 clamp or collar used in the device according to the invention;

- Figure 5 is a partial schematic side view of another embodiment of the device according to the invention;

15 - Figure 6 is a partial schematic perspective view of two armour windings contained in a flexible pipe;

- Figure 7 is a partial perspective view of one type of flexible pipe; and

20 - Figure 8 is a schematic sectional view of the connection means when the flexible pipe includes an insulating tape.

In the oil industry and especially in offshore oil
25 production, several types of flexible pipe may be used and these are described and shown in API (American Petroleum Institute) 17J. The flexible pipes are called "smooth bore" when the innermost element consists of a polymeric sheath, and "rough bore" when the innermost
30 element consists of a metal carcass.

Whatever the type of flexible pipe, it comprises at least two armour plies, each consisting of metal wires wound helically with a long pitch and a small lay angle
35 about the longitudinal axis of the flexible pipe, the

two armour plies being crossed or wound in opposite directions. The metal wires 41 of each armour ply are generally in localized contact with each other at various points. Of course, the flexible pipe may
5 comprise more than two armour plies, the result being that the winding of the wires constituting the armours produces thousands of points of contact between two consecutive armour plies, as shown schematically in Figure 6. In the examples shown in Figure 7, the
10 flexible pipe 1 comprises, from the outside inwards:

- an outer sealed polymeric sheath 2 which is exposed to seawater and/or in contact with the seabed when the flexible pipe is submerged in the sea;
- a group 3 of tensile armour plies comprising
15 two armour plies 4 and 5 wound crosswise or in opposite directions with the same lay angle;
 - a pressure vault 7;
 - an inner polymeric sealing sheath 8; and
 - a metal carcass 9 consisting of a winding with
20 a short pitch close to 90° .

Very often, an antifriction tape 11 is placed between two consecutive armours and wound with a short pitch about the longitudinal axis of the flexible pipe.

25 The two, inner and outer, sealing sheaths define an annular space in which the structural elements of the flexible pipe are placed. In the case of Figure 7, the structural elements consist of the tensile armour plies 4 and 5 and the pressure vault 7.

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The device according to the invention is intended to be fitted on the spanning length of the flexible pipe, as shown in Figure 1. The expression "spanning length" is understood to mean the intermediate regions 40 of the
35 flexible pipe which are relatively far from the end

20 The device 14 comprises (Figures 2 and 3) a collar 15, which is often called a clamp in this particular technical field and which is mounted tightly and preferably in a sealed manner around the flexible pipe, sealing being able to be achieved by circular or
25 torroidal seals 16, and at least one anode 17 which is fastened to the clamp 15, electrical continuity between the anode 17 and the clamp 15 being provided by conductors 18. The anode 17 is generally in the form of a parallelepiped having a length of between 1 and 5 m.
30 The number of anodes 17 around and on the outside of the clamp is between 1 and 6 depending on the desired corrosion protection, on the nature of the metal used for making the anode, which metal is preferably aluminium, zinc, etc., the metal used having to have a
35 reference potential lower than the immunity potential

of the steel of the armours 4, 5, and on the lifetime of the cathodic protection of the flexible pipe, which is of the order of 20 years. In the foregoing, when an anode system is referred to, this means that the protection device comprises one or more anodes fastened to the support clamp.

The clamp 15 consists of two semicircular clamping members which are joined together, around the flexible pipe, by bolts 19. The clamp 15 includes, preferably at regular intervals, recesses 20 and through-passages 21 for the insertion of shanks 22 of bolts 23, each bolt shank 22 being screwed into or in contact with at least one metal wire of the first tensile armour 4 located immediately beneath the outer sealing sheath 2 of the flexible pipe. In this way, and as long as the clamp is made of metal, there is sure to be an electrical connection between the anode system 17 fastened to the clamp 15 and all the metal wires of the first tensile armour ply 4. In Figure 2, the metal tensile armours are shown in the form of small rectangles 42 which are assumed to be similar to the turns 41 of the armours. Since the turns of an armour are in local mutual contact at various points, and with the turns of the other armour ply which follows, thousands of points of contact 24 are obtained between the two armour plies 4 and 5. Consequently, electrical continuity is provided over the entire length of the flexible pipe under the influence of the said anode. Thus, the cathodic protection of the tensile armours is provided over their entire useful length.

In certain cases, the bolt shank 22 is not screwed into the armour but welded, brazed or adhesively bonded to the armour 4, the end result being that electrical continuity is provided between the anode or anodes 17

In another embodiment of the invention, shown in Figure 4, each half-clamp 15 comprises a penetrating part 25 which is housed in a notch 26 made in the outer sealing sheath 2, the lower end 27 of the part 25 coming into contact with the first metal armour 4. Sealing between the notch 26 and the external medium is provided by known means effective for preventing the ingress of seawater into the flexible pipe.

In another embodiment of the invention, the device is made in two separate parts (Figure 5). The first part 28 consists of a relatively long clamp 29 and one or more anodes (not shown) fastened to the said clamp 29. The clamp 29 is used only to support the anode or anodes and does not provide electrical continuity with the armour 4. The second part 30 consists of a small collar or clamp 31 which is electrically connected to the clamp 29 by conductors 32. It is the clamp 31 which includes the means for contacting with the armour 4. These means may be bolts similar to the bolts 23, penetrating parts 25 like those in Figure 4, or as bolt shanks soldered, brazed or adhesively bonded to at least one metal wire of the said armour.

It should be understood that the region of the flexible pipe on which the clamps 29 and 30 are fitted is an intermediate region within the meaning of the invention, whatever the distance separating the two clamps 29 and 30. In practice, this distance, of the same order of magnitude as the anodes, is approximately 1 to 5 m.

35 In the type of flexible pipe shown in Figure 7, the two

In the embodiment shown in Figure 5, the clamp 29 may not be made of metal and the clamp 31 may be made of an electrically conducting metal. Conduction between the anode or anodes and the armour in question will then be provided by the conductors 32 and the contacting means provided in the clamp 31.